



Fairfield County
Community Foundation
The Fund for Women and Girls

The Power of Investing in Girls

Lessons from the Field

A guide for nonprofit organizations and donors



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The Power of Investing in Girls: Lessons from the Field

Despite the affluence in Fairfield County, Connecticut, a large number of girls in our region grow up in poverty and go on to raise families in poverty.

There are over 24,000 female-headed households with children age 18 and younger in Fairfield County. Among those with children under 5, nearly *half* live in poverty (defined as a family of three making \$16,090, according to the 2005 Federal Poverty Guidelines, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services).¹



Girls growing up in poverty may not have the support or resources to succeed in school and adequately prepare for 21st century jobs and, as a result, may be unable to break the poverty cycle.

What does it take to improve the lives of girls in Fairfield County? How can one individual—or a collective giving strategy, such as the Fairfield County Community Foundation’s Fund for Women and Girls—make a lasting, positive impact in the lives of girls and the women they will become?

The Fairfield County Community Foundation’s Fund for Women and Girls began its grantmaking in support of girls in 2003 with these questions and others. *Since then, we’ve distributed more than \$780,000 to 22 organizations for programs that addressed a diverse set of needs among girls. Cumulatively, these programs reached over 1,200 girls living in Fairfield County.*

The Fund’s grantmaking experience over five years has resulted in key lessons learned about the qualities of the most effective programs for improving the lives of girls, and about the role of funders in supporting effective programming. These lessons helped shape the Fund’s emerging grantmaking strategy and formed the basis of a new strategic investor framework that was implemented in 2008. This white paper summarizes these lessons and is offered both to donors and nonprofit organizations as a learning tool.

Fairfield County Girls Face Significant Challenges

On average, 8.5% of Connecticut children live in poverty—approximately one out of 12 children. Yet 25.1% of Bridgeport children—*one out of four*—live in poverty. In Norwalk, one out of ten children lives in poverty (9.9%).² Girls growing up in poverty may not have the support or resources to succeed in school and adequately prepare for 21st century jobs and, as a result, may be unable to break the poverty cycle.

Fairfield County girls face other challenges that may prevent them from reaching their full potential. At a December 2008 Fund for Women and Girls learning circle, providers reported high levels of alcohol and substance abuse among girls, as well as unprotected sexual activity leading to sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. The providers’ observations are borne out

by the results of the Connecticut Department of Health 2007 Survey of Teen Risk Behaviors ³ (see sidebar).

Even more alarming was providers' reports of seeing these risky behaviors among younger and younger girls. While the majority of adolescent risk behavior surveys focus on youth ages 12 and older, a 2000 University of Connecticut prevalence study does support the providers' observation.

This study reports that underage alcohol consumption in Fairfield County is 20% higher than the national norm, and that the average age of onset is 11.7 years of age.⁴ The American Medical Association warns, "Individuals who first use alcohol in the age range of 11 to 14 years are at much greater risk of subsequently developing alcohol use disorders. Underage drinkers are susceptible to several immediate consequences of alcohol use, including blackouts, hangovers, and alcohol poisoning. They also may be at elevated risk for experiencing neurodegeneration (particularly in regions of the brain responsible for learning and memory), impairments in functional brain activity, and the appearance of neurocognitive deficits. Additionally, underage drinking, the occurrence of drinking episodes, and a pattern of binge drinking directly impair study habits and erode the development of transitional skills needed for progression to adulthood."⁵

According to the Connecticut Children's Medical Center's "Dating Violence" fact sheet, Connecticut leads the nation in reports of dating violence.⁶ A survey of Fairfield County teens conducted by the Norwalk-based Center for Youth Leadership found that 26% of teens surveyed had been punched, kicked or slapped by their partner during the past 12 months.⁷ Girls are disproportionately the victims of this violence.

Teen dating violence has long-term negative effects for teens who are victims. According to the Connecticut Children's Medical Center, "Youth who are victims of dating violence are more likely than other teens to use drugs, have eating disorders, engage in risky sexual behaviors, become teen parents, and contemplate or attempt suicide. And that is just during their teenage years. As adults, teen dating violence victims are more likely than others to be victims of domestic violence, a condition that leads to even more devastating effects on their health, their safety, and their families."⁸

The rising involvement of adolescent girls in the juvenile justice system is also a continued concern. The number of girls involved in Connecticut's court systems has increased in recent years. According to "The Social State of CT 2005," published by the Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, "In just one year—from 2003 to 2004—the number of girls referred for delinquency rose from 2,765 to 3,583; status offense referrals went from 1,611 to 1,869; detention rose from 468 to 529; and probation increased from 631 to 713." The report cited a 2002 University of Connecticut study that concluded that "girls needed appropriate, gender-specific interventions to avoid long-term involvement in the court system after a status offense."⁹



Risk Behaviors of Connecticut Teen Girls

Of the nearly 1,000 9th- 12th grade girls surveyed:

29.3% admitted to feeling sad or hopeless for a period of two weeks or more

16.5% had seriously considered suicide within the last year

22.6% had smoked at least one cigarette within the last month

28.7% reported watching 3 or more hours of TV on the average school day

59.8% described themselves as trying to lose weight

45.3% had had at least one alcoholic drink within the last month

37.2% had used marijuana at least once

41.8% had had sexual intercourse at least once

*Connecticut Department of Public Health
2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey*

A Gender “Lens” is Critical

The Fund’s focus on programs that benefit women and girls was based not only on the recognition of the significant challenges facing Fairfield County women and girls, but also on the belief that women and girls were an under-acknowledged and under-supported resource for regional leadership and community development. Reflecting that belief, the Fund looked for program models and practices that would build on girls’ unique strengths and opportunities.



“To be fully effective for girls and boys, the design and operation of a program must consider gender—in a manner that regards gender differences as innate and unchangeable, but in a way that explores the social construction of gender and invites young women and men to challenge gender norms, examine gender privilege, and create a balance of power between girls and boys.”

*“The New Girls’ Movement:
Implications for Youth
Programs”
Ms. Foundation*

When we began supporting girls’ programming in 2003, it quickly became clear there were no established in-county experts or best practices. Most of the organizations responding to the Fund’s first Request for Proposals had no prior experience providing programming to girls. Further, when these programs were funded and implemented, we found that they were not unilaterally based in research about the specific needs of girls. The Fund’s grantmaking in this area was not simply adding resources to an established program sector but, rather, *creating a new program sector within the Fairfield County youth development landscape.*

We turned to research conducted by the Ms. Foundation, and applied its research regarding best practices to build a profile of the key elements of effective programming for girls. Those key practices and the Fund’s grant review guidelines were communicated in all Requests for Proposals. These documents also helped build awareness among providers of the program design elements that would lead not just to a successful grant application, but to a successful program for girls.

We identified the following five key practices that are evident in effective girls’ programs. In each of these practice areas, the Fund found that it could play a significant role in strengthening programming for girls.

Key Practice No. 1: Safe Environment

Programs that effectively apply the gender lens to their service delivery develop and maintain an environment in which girls feel physically and emotionally safe. The most successful programs actively involve girls in the development of an environment that permits the open sharing of ideas, acceptance of differences, and equal opportunities to lead and contribute. Successful programs acknowledge diversity and work deliberately to ensure that staff, curricula, and projects are culturally sensitive and that, in addition to gender, program design reflects the unique socio-economic, developmental, and cultural needs and characteristics of the group of girls they serve.

Accordingly, in forming groups, girls’ programs need to pay special attention to the ages of participants, the cultural and socio-economic background of participants, and the special challenges a participant or group of participants may face. This is critical to ensure that each participant will feel

safe and have the opportunity to be a contributing member. The size of groups and frequency of meetings will also enhance or detract from the group's feeling of safety. Small groups that meet regularly will have an easier time fostering safe, supportive relationships among participants.

Protecting the safety of the program environment is an on-going challenge for girls' program providers. Providers attending the 2008 learning circle noted that problems that erupted between individual girls often threatened the safety and productivity of the entire group. Staff vigilance, sensitivity and creativity are required to recognize and defuse issues before they impair participants' perception of the program's safety.¹⁰

Key Practice No. 2: Focus on Leadership Skills and Opportunities

The Ms. Foundation's 2001 report, "The New Girls' Movement: Implications for Youth Programs" notes: "Effective girl-focused programs build leadership skills, strengthen girls' willingness and capacity to take action on issues that matter to them, and help them develop into strong, healthy women and agents of social change in their communities."¹¹

Learning from the Ms. Foundation's work, the Fund sought to support programs that were effective in building leadership skills through a girl-driven program design that involves girls in:

- Identifying issues that concerned them,
- Developing social action strategies for addressing those concerns, and
- Directly involving girls in the evaluation of their project's success and their personal development.

The Fund has found that the most successful programs also provide girls with opportunities to learn leadership skills and apply their new skills in the context of a group project. Involving girls in social change projects which address a community issue through fundraising, research, and/or advocacy is a particularly effective device for developing leadership skills.

Social change projects help demonstrate to girls the power they have not just to improve their own life circumstances, but to improve their communities. By developing girls as community leaders, this leadership advancement strategy also directly addresses the Fund's concern that women and girls are an under-tapped community resource.

Lastly, successful programs celebrate the success and commitment of participating girls.

Key Practice No. 3: Staff Knowledge and Commitment

The Fund looked for programs with staff who understood female adolescent development and had specific knowledge and expertise in gender-specific program delivery. When it became clear that this expertise was not widely present among Fairfield County's youth-serving organizations, we sought to



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strengthen nonprofit expertise in these areas by supporting convening and training opportunities for providers.

These training and convening opportunities have helped develop the expertise of the Fund and its nonprofit partners, and provided a valuable peer networking opportunity for those providers focused on the unique needs of women and girls.



Forging support from families was a part of the charge of creating a safe space for girls in their programs. If girls went home to environments in which they did not feel safe to speak up and pursue goals, the program's impact was diminished.

Key Practice No. 4: Family Collaboration and Support

At the program level, girls achieved more when a collaboration was formed among the girl, the program(s), and her family and significant others. Providers found that family support affected girls' attendance, as well as their participation in trips and events held outside of regular meeting times.

Providers also noted that forging support from families was a part of the charge of creating a safe space for girls in their programs. If girls went home to environments in which they did not feel safe to speak up and pursue goals, the program's impact was diminished.

Programs utilized a variety of strategies to foster support from families. One provider implemented quarterly family dinners at which girls could share their successes and goals. Another provider used home visits to assess the family environment and to build trust and support from parents and guardians.

Key Practice No. 5: Girl-Driven Evaluation

Measuring impact is critical to any social investor. However, the Fund found that measuring the results of the girls' programs it supported presented a unique set of challenges and opportunities.

The Fund designed a set of criteria to evaluate existing and future grantee partners. Yet, evaluating programs was difficult for several reasons. First, we allowed our early grantee partners to define the problems they would address and the outcomes they would seek, so proposals spanned grappling with domestic violence and bullying to enhancing reading skills. This did not offer us the opportunity to compare and contrast program effectiveness among all the funded programs. The Fund's more recent grant cycles focused providers on specific girls' achievement and leadership outcomes.

Second, programs struggle with collecting meaningful evaluative data. In the early years of the Fund's grantmaking, programs were often treading in new territory and did not always have systems in place for measuring the impact of these new programs on girls' lives. Some programs that operate in school settings continue to report considerable difficulty in accessing the baseline and follow-up academic and social data that would allow them to effectively evaluate the impact of services on girls' achievement.¹²

Girls' programs have a unique opportunity to build on the impact and effectiveness of their programs by implementing girl-driven evaluation

programs. However, most Fairfield County providers are inexperienced with these participatory evaluation frameworks.

The Ms. Foundation has developed and tested a number of tools that can be used as part of a participatory evaluation framework and states the case for using this type of evaluation: “Participatory research is grounded in principles of inclusion, equal rights, and equal access...Participatory research stresses fairness and respect, encourages the broadest possible distribution of power, and requires that all members of a group share the decision-making.”¹³

Girl-driven evaluations empower girls to reflect on their own success and achievement, and use their findings to influence program development. The participatory evaluation process reinforces their new skills in goal-setting and problem-solving, and provides new opportunities for leadership and participation.

Building organizational capacity to define and measure outcomes within a girl-driven evaluation framework continues to be an important focus of Fund-supported training for nonprofit providers.



“Achieving gender equality and empowering women is a goal in itself. It is also a condition for building healthier, better educated, more peaceful and more prosperous societies.

When women are fully empowered and engaged, all of society benefits. Only in this way can we successfully take on the enormous challenges confronting our world...”

*General Ban Ki-moon
United Nations Secretary*

The Next Chapter for the Fund for Women and Girls

Based on our research, in the spring of 2008 the Fund announced a new grantmaking focus: increasing the economic security of low-income working women with dependents. However, the Fund remains committed to developing and supporting high quality, gender-specific leadership development programming for girls because this work is so interconnected.

Collaborative Learning

The Fund has found that collaborative learning that involves girls, providers, and donors is a particularly effective way to:

- Identify the challenges facing girls and programs,
- Share program strategies, and
- Build organizational capacity to implement best practices and conduct effective evaluation.

The Fund’s grantee partners were strengthened by Fund-supported learning opportunities that brought them together with other nonprofit colleagues who had similar objectives and faced similar challenges. The Fund itself benefitted by strengthening our knowledge and expertise of issues facing girls and by forging new community partnerships. An added benefit of collaborative learning is that it gives the Fund the opportunity to practice what we preach: building safe environments and processes for participatory learning and decision-making that mirror the environments and processes we hope to find in girls’ programs.

The Fund will continue to lead the development of this field in Fairfield

County by supporting continued opportunities for collaborative learning and by finding new ways to involve Fairfield County girls in our learning processes.

Meeting the Diverse Needs of Fairfield County Girls

In order to help the Fund's nonprofit partners effectively meet the needs of their highest risk girls, we also need to expand the collaborative learning process to include experts from educational, violence prevention, and juvenile justice fields, among others. Girls' programs that serve the highest risk girls may need to incorporate additional program elements to achieve positive outcomes with the girls they serve.



Younger girls, ages 9-12, are at increased risk of substance use, sexual activity, and violence. These girls are more vulnerable because they lack the maturity, knowledge, and communication skills to navigate risk. Because of their age, the partnership of parents, guardians, and schools is even more important.

For example, research into the needs of girls involved in the juvenile justice system indicates that these girls benefit from programs that include a strong mental health component focused on trauma reduction.¹⁴ This type of programming is best delivered by qualified mental health professionals and may be outside the expertise of most girls' programs. With further work, the Fund can help our nonprofit partners develop a menu of best practices that are targeted to the unique needs of diverse groups of girls, as well as the limitations of the models and practices we have identified.

The Fund can also take an important role in helping providers find new models and strategies for working with younger girls, ages 9-12, who are at increased risk of substance use, sexual activity, and violence. These girls are more vulnerable because they lack the maturity, knowledge, and communication skills to navigate risk. Because of their age, the partnership of parents, guardians, and schools is even more important. The Fund can help build Fairfield County nonprofits' capacity to serve younger girls by helping to build community understanding of the risks facing girls ages 9-12 and the need for gender-specific and developmentally appropriate programming that supports these girls.

Social Networking as a Tool

Social networking technology holds tremendous potential for girls' programs, and the Fund can help develop our nonprofit partners' capacity to use this new technology safely and effectively.

Social media such as Facebook or MySpace, along with e-mail and text messaging, offer a great resource for expanding our collaborative learning network and for using that network to creatively address emerging issues in real time. Our nonprofit partners have noted the benefit of networking with peers. The development of a web-based social network would allow girls' program providers to contact each other regularly for support, suggestions, and collaboration.

Social networking technologies also offer powerful new possibilities for reaching out to and connecting with girls. Of course, safety and confidentiality of program participants will be a priority. If these digital tools are used in girls'



The Fund for Women and Girls was established in 1998 by women for women. It is a permanent Field of Interest fund of the Fairfield County Community Foundation in Connecticut, and is the largest women’s fund in New England.

The Fund’s objectives include identifying and addressing the needs of women and girls in Fairfield County, and encouraging collective, targeted giving to create positive change for women and girls in Fairfield County’s communities.

In 2007, the Fund published the first comprehensive research study on the status of women and girls in Fairfield County, “Holding Up Half the Sky.” The report and additional information about the Fund or the Fairfield County Community Foundation is available at www.fccfoundation.org.

programs, the challenge of creating a safe space will be expanded to include a safe cyberspace.

Lastly, social networking technologies offer great new tools for communicating with parents, guardians, schools, and other key constituencies. Recognizing that these constituencies are critical to achieving our long-term vision, both the Fund and our nonprofit partners need to build our capacity to take advantage of digital technologies to achieve our objectives.

Measuring Impact

As the Fund shifts its grantmaking focus to women’s economic security, we will also look to build the capacity of girls’ programs to measure their impact on the future economic security of the girls they serve.

Our vision is of a county where all women and girls have the skills and support they need to build a rewarding and secure life for themselves and their families. Programs that strengthen girls are an important part of making that vision a reality. As we begin our next ten years, we will work with our nonprofit partners to find ways to measure the long-term impact of their programs and to use what we learn to continue to develop and enhance programs that improve the lives of women and girls in Fairfield County.

The Fund for Women and Girls Thanks Our Girls’ Program Partners Since 2003

Catholic Charities	Family & Children’s Agency	Ralphola Taylor Community Center/
Center for Women and Families EFC, Inc.	FSW, Inc.	Central CT Coast YMCA
Center for Youth Leadership	Girls Scout Council of SW Connecticut	ReadyKids
CTE, Inc.	Housatonic Community College Foundation, Inc.	RYASAP (Regional Youth/Adult Substance Abuse Project)
Danbury Youth Services	Human Services Council of Mid-Fairfield	Stamford Youth Services Bureau
Discovery Museum	Norwalk Housing Foundation	SoundWaters
Domus Foundation	Project Return	YWCA of Greenwich
Fairfield University		
Family Centers		

For More Information About Girls Programming

For information about Fund for Women and Girls’ sponsored training for nonprofit organizations interested in girls’ programming, contact Jan Laster, RYASAP Wellness Partnership Director, at 203.579.2727, ext. 310.

Endnotes

¹ Connecticut Association for Human Services, *Seeds of Prosperity: Children of Low Income Working Families* (2006), p. 24, www.cahs.org (“Seeds of Prosperity”)

² Ibid

³ CT Department of Public Health, *2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results*, www.ct.gov/dph

⁴ CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, *CT SPF Sub-Region 1-A Profile Prepared by Lower Fairfield County Regional Action Council*, p. 2, www.ct.gov/dmhas

⁵ Council on Scientific Affairs, Report 11, A-03; December 1999

⁶ Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, *Dating Violence Fact Sheet*, www.ccmckids.org/VPP/datingviolence.asp

⁷ Fairfield County Community Foundation, Fund for Women and Girls, *Holding Up Half the Sky*, p. 15

⁸ Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, *Dating Violence Fact Sheet*, www.ccmckids.org/VPP/datingviolence.asp

⁹ Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, Vassar College, *Social State of CT 2005*, p. 72

¹⁰ Notes from December 2, 2008 Learning Circle conducted by RYASAP, on file at the Fairfield County Community Foundation (*Learning Circle Notes*)

¹¹ Ms. Foundation, *The New Girls’ Movement: Implications for Youth Programs*, p. 3.

¹² *Learning Circle Notes*

¹³ Ms. Foundation for Women, Collaborative Fund for Healthy Girls, Healthy Women, *The New Girls’ Movement: New Assessment Tools for Youth Programs*, p.2, www.msfoundation.org

¹⁴ National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, *Trauma Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System: Critical Issues and New Directions*, June 2007, www.ncmhjj.com



If you would like to join others in supporting the work of the Fund for Women and Girls, you can make a secure, online donation at www.fccfoundation.org, or mail a check payable to FCCF Fund for Women and Girls to the Fairfield County Community Foundation, 383 Main Ave., Norwalk, CT 06851.

Thank you!